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Defector: Soviet Union Won Start Nuclear War, Andropov Like Robot

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Arkady Nikolayevich Shevchenko doesn't like to be called a defector. Instead, he says he "broke with the Soviet Government."

That's what he told about 500 people at Idaho State University's Student Union Building ballroom Tuesday night. He received a warm response from the crowd.

There's no word in the Russian language which means "defector," says Shevchenko, and he doesn't like the word. "It smells like traitor," he said. "I do not consider myself traitor. I consider Soviet leadership traitors."

Then-Under Secretary General for political and security council affairs at the United Nations and one of Secretary General Kurt Waldheim's top advisors, Shevchenko decided in April 1978 to break with his government.

But he was also a Soviet diplomat. His U.N. position had put him in almost daily contact with the Kremlin, where he said members of the Politburo had no respect for his job as an international civil servant.

He said the decision to leave had not come quickly, but over a period of years. He had amassed an "accumulation of discontent" which came from learning of the "duplicitous" of Soviet leaders.

Somehow, the KGB (secret police in the USSR) got wind of his discontent, tricked his wife into going back to Moscow by telling her he had been kidnapped, then ordered him back to Moscow for "consultation."

He knew better. Though he had been planning to break with the government, he knew that the KGB was onto him. He disappeared, only to surface a few days later at the Century Association, an elite New York club.

Eventually, his wife was "eliminated." Shevchenko has no proof, but believes the KGB made it a "medical assassination," through an overdose of drugs or some other treatment.

Immediately debriefed by the CIA after defecting, he says he told them everything he knew about Soviet leaders and the country's goals.

His audience last night got a shortened version of that information, with updates on the possibility of nuclear war and the personality of new Party General Secretary Yuri Andropov.

Shevchenko emphatically said that the Politburo, barring an accident, would not start a nuclear war. His opinion is "based on knowledge of the thinking of the Soviet leadership. They'd like to achieve their goals, but not through nuclear war. They know themselves they would perish."

On Andropov, he said the new leader is "In my view the most intelligent Soviet leader since Lenin's time." He said Andropov was unusual among recent Soviet leaders because of two reasons: he was the first one since Lenin who established and consolidated his power so quickly and he was the oldest of the Soviet leaders to do so at age 69.

Shevchenko said Andropov, because of his experience as head of the KGB, is the only one of the Politburo who knows the "real situation" in the Soviet Union. "It is one of his assets," said Shevchenko.

The former ambassador characterized Andropov's regime as having "new style, new tempo," and unlike Brezhnev in his last years, he says Andropov still has the physical energy to do his job.

But even Andropov is not in good health, says Shevchenko. "A couple of times we vacationed in same resort. We even were treated by same doctors. He has serious heart condition."

A look at unretouched photos will tell the story, he says. "The man looks much older than his age. He doesn't have much time to implement his new plan if he has new plan."

He noted that Andropov is skillful and has a strong will, but also said he is "deprived of any human approach. He's almost like robot," who makes decisions on facts and only facts.

But, he explained, Andropov must share his power with the other 12 members of the Politburo. That task is made easier by his status as an "apparatchik" — one who has worked within the Communist Party all his life — but even that has its drawbacks.

"Andropov is not something new," said Shevchenko. "He is not different man from others in Politburo."

Essentially, he said, "all Soviet leaders are cut from same cloth. They all truly believe in final victory of Soviet-style Communism."

Shevchenko believes that substantially different policies could come from a new generation of Soviet leaders, but does not expect that to happen for at least another 10 to 15 years.

Meanwhile, he says Andropov's recent drive to eliminate corruption from the Soviet Union could eventually cause him trouble.

"I would not be surprised if Andropov would deprive elite class of their privileges, he may be removed like Khrushchev was removed."

He says the action is "treating the symptom, not the disease," which he says is overcentralization of power in the Soviet Union. As an example, he told the audience that the Politburo meets every week to consider 70 to 100 questions, some of them relatively small matters such as the appropriation of funds for a public building.

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His growing discontent with Soviet leaders and the Russian obsession with secrecy finally took their toll on Shevchenko.

"Maybe I was born in wrong country," he said. "I didn't like to do all my life what I was ordered to do. They watch you all the time. Even open your mail and bug you all the time."

"But I have never regretted my decision," he added. "I consider this country has given me what my motherland didn't give me."